

[She's Just Done Well]

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11 B 2 SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT

LIFE HISTORY SHE'S JUST DONE WELL

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Name of Person Interviewed Mrs. Agnes Harrell

Fictitious Name Agnes Avant

Address Marion, S. C.

Place Marion County

Occupation Housework

Name of Writer Annie Ruth Davis

Name of Reviser

It was about two o'clock and Agnes Avant had just finished washing up her dinner dishes. A short woman, only five feet in height and weighing over two hundred pounds, she was dressed in a black silk skirt, blue and white checked cotton jacket, and a big print apron. Her well-rounded face, big bright eyes, mass of black wavy hair, and complexion glowing with health little show the hardships she has undergone in the last seventeen years. When complimented on the beauty of her hair, she remarked: "Yes, my hair is pretty. The Bible

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says a woman's hair is her glory, and there's a 2 lot of truth in them words, too, if you know'd it.

"Had to go to work this morning and ain't got things cleaned up like I generally keeps them looking. But that's all right - reckon you've seen things tore up before.

"No'm, I don't mind telling you whatever you might want to know 'bout me. And I don't see no sense in putting no other name different from mine to what you write 'bout me neither. I've lived a life I don't mind nobody knowing and I hope when I ain't able to keep going, there'll be some way provided. Yes'm, I've made a honest living for me and my children seventeen years and I ain't got nothing I care 'bout keeping under no cover. People needn't come up and say they had to do this and that sharp trick to get along 'cause if they live a decent life, there'll always be some way provided.

"I've got three children - all them's boys. Charlie's nineteen, Louis, he's seventeen, and Jasper's fifteen. I've sho' had a tough time raising my younguns, too, but I thank the Lord for sparing me to get them up big enough to help themselves. I've had lots of trouble and hard times to get along, but by the help of the good Lord and other people, I've pulled through to the present and I'm thankful. Yes, I'm thankful to Our Father and President Roosevelt for what they've done for me and my children.

"Long as my father and mother lived, I never did know what it was to want for anything. I was born and raised in No. 6 Township, Georgetown County, on my father's farm along with twelve other head of children. No. 6 Township, that's thirty-two miles from Georgetown, twixt there and Hemingway. I always was a poor girl, but we never know'd what it was to want for anything. My father owned a two-horse farm and we made enough of provisions on the farm to last from one year till the next. One year we made thirteen banks of eating 3 potatoes and two big barns of corn outside of our cotton. Then in the summer we made enough market stuff to buy all our little extras. Yes, if I had today what I

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used to have I wouldn't have to worry over life. But I'll tell you, when you lose your mother and father, seems like everything you've got's gone.

"I went to a little school called Carver's Bay first and then the name changed to Dunnegan School. Yes'm, when I left that country, the school was still passing through the name of Dunnegan. But going to school in my young days sho' wasn't near like it is now. I never went to school no higher than the fourth grade and then I hadn't done much. We had to leave home at seven-thirty o'clock in the morning to get to school on time and walk every bit of one and one-half miles. School lasted from nine o'clock to four o'clock and that'd put me to get home 'bout five 'clock in the evening. Soon as we got home, we had to go to work on the farm. Finally, it just got to the place where I had to quit school to help my father make a crop. You see, there wasn't but one right time to make a crop just like I learned afterwards there wasn't but one right time to go to school. Children's wonderfully blessed to go to school this day and time, I'll tell you.

"I reckon I was 'bout fourteen years old when I quit school, and got married at nineteen. My husband was a farmer and we stayed on his father's farm six years and made a good living. But that last year we stuck together, everything fell through on the farm. My husband said, 'Love, I believe I'll go and work in the cotton mill next year and then we'll have something to get another start with.' I begged him not to go for I know'd cotton mills was fast places and he'd drift away, but he would go in spite of all I could say. And I was right - he never come back to live with me and the younguns no more.

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I felt it; know'd it was coming. That's what wrecks so many homes and how-come I hated so bad for him to leave me. It nearly run me crazy 'cause he'd been good to me as could be 'fore he left home. He just got out and kept a-drifting - never did have no fusses in all our married life. Seems like I could get over burying my first child, what died with the stomach colitis and yellow t'rash, better than I could him leaving me.

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"He comes back off and on to spend a night, but he ain't been no service to us in seventeen years. Some people's ashamed to tell such stuff as that, but I ain't. The good Lord knows it and I don't care if the world does. A woman can't help her husband walking off and leaving her, but she can live a respectable life. When he left me with them younguns and went to work in the cotton mill, he was making eighteen dollars a week. He know'd my little children were suffering, but he wouldn't give us a penny. Yes'm, my oldest boy was a-crying for bread and I don't know what we would've done, but the good Lord opened and provided a way. And since I've been in Marion, I've worked by the hardest and shed many a tear, but he still don't give us near a cent - always acts like he's down and out when he comes to see us.

"I stayed on where I was for five years after my husband left me and worked for what I got. Worked on the farm in the summer and took in washing in the winter to keep us going. I decided while I had my three children in a hut, I better keep them there 'cause I know'd it's hardly ever two families can get along. Yes'm, I've kept house to myself ever since I was married.

"I was getting along so poorly a-working so hard down in Georgetown County, I moved to McCall and worked in the cotton mill for twelve years. My husband was a-working in a mill to Rockingham, North Carolina at that time. I made four dollars a week there a-working on the winders and at them rates, I could buy all we wanted to eat and pay house rent out of it, too, but I sho' 5 can't do it now. I worked on that job till the mill shut down and left me to get along best I could them last four months I stayed to McCall. Why I picked cotton along and along for a living and the good people give me something to eat.

"It wasn't long from then till Ida Wise, a woman I know'd in McCall, moved up here to Marion and persuaded me to tear up and come to Marion, too. She said she had a job for me to start on time I got here, but I found myself dropped down in a bunch of strangers and not a piece of job to bring me in a bite of bread. Had to go in the cotton patch down to

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Mr. Johnson's and pick cotton to pay my house rent the first year I come here to live. And my little baby was having chill and fever and I never know'd which way to turn.

"I moved to Marion in 1929 and rented a house over on Montgomery Street for six dollars a month. Well, it ain't no use to round a stump to tell the truth - might as well come up and face the fore. I've raked lawns and cleaned house for people many a day to get something to eat. Mrs. Green, she's the best friend I ever know'd. She's all the time a-going 'bout this town and helping some poor creature get along. She learned 'bout the trouble I was in and she went to people all over this town and said, 'Agnes is here on us with those three children to take care of and if she can get anything to do, she'll do it. Now, people, I want all of you to give her a job.' Yes'm, Mrs. Green taken that much interest in me and I'm thankful to her for it.

"Well, I went to doing house cleaning for a dollar a day and I don't say it 'cause it's me, but ain't nobody never complained 'bout my work yet. Cose getting a day's work onced in awhile wasn't enough to feed and clothe me and three younguns and pay house rent, too, but everybody was mighty good to help us along. Why those people at the schoolhouse give me enough of what the 6 school children carried there at Thanksgiving for poor people to last me till Christmas. Then they give me lead at Christmas to carry me over another month. And Judge and Mrs. Green, they've sho' been good to me. Don't seem like just a friend - seem more like a mother and a father. Yes'm that's just the way I feels 'bout Judge and Mrs. Green, 'cause when you lose your mother and your father, seems like the sun don't shine nowhere. Then there's Miss Eunice Clover, she's got out many a day and got me something to eat. Don't know where she got it from, but she'd come stepping in with it herself.

"From then on, I kept on a-catching what work I could, 'cause I've got the will to do and don't mind putting my hand to any work that's got a honest living in it. It's many a day that I've worked for the county cleaning up the City Hall and Health Department. But I've done so much hard work in my life, I can't work like I used to. Bringing children into the world,

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tending them, a-laboring to make a living, and doing all the housework, that's more than half if you know'd it.

"I kept on doing a day's work round and 'bout till this government relief work come up. I didn't join it right off, but Mrs. Green's sister got to be head over the sewing room and she sent word for me to sign up on the government work. Mrs. Green explained to her that I was embarrassed to do such as that, but she said I might as well get it as the others that was getting it. You know, it wasn't a bit of trouble for me to get on. They started me off making quilts in 1934 and then I worked myself up till I got to be a pretty good seamstress. They raised and cut us so much on that sewing room job till it's hard to tell how much I was getting, but our average wages was twenty-six dollars a month mostly. Then the government give us some commodities along with the pay such as: plain flour, pack of butter, and some prunes. Best thing they 7 give us was this here smoke meat - that was just fine. Cose it was all a help, you can feel that.

"I started working for the government in 1934 and in 1936, I thought to be sure they'd cut me off. My boy, Charlie, went off to the C.C.C. Camp at King's Mountain. But 'bout the time they made up to take me off the sewing room. Charlie quit and come home - just didn't like it. You know, while that boy was in the C.C.C. Camp, I never got a dollar of his money. He'd spend his part soon as he got it and time the other part come home to me, he'd be here to grab it. Never stayed in the C.C.C. Camp but four months. Woman, I'll tell you, I've worked for myself.

"I worked on for the government till 'bout a year and six months ago. Charlie got a job at the veneer plant and just 'cause he was making a \$1.90 a day, they took my relief job away from me. Charlie lost his job at the veneer plant last July and we've sho' had it tough getting along since then. I never tried to get back on the government work. Ain't spent on thought over it only I knows some people's working for the government that don't needs it like I does. There's plenty women foreman have husbands a-working and just 'cause my little boy had a job, they cut me off. It's a dishonest proposition the way they work so

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unfair with it. But I don't reckon I ought to talk such 'bout it. They considered I didn't need it and if it ain't helping me now, it's helping some other poor somebody and I'm thankful for them. Anyhow it don't matter with me - anything that's got a honest living in it, I'll go right at it. Still, when this government work plays out, a heap of people go feel what a pinch is. They'd feel just like my boy, if they was cut off now - wouldn't have no job and couldn't get none. Can't hardly buy a job these days.

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"Little as people knows it, I've sho' been up against a tough proposition since I got dropped from the W.P.A. I work a day and a half a week cleaning up the Methodist Church and the City Hall and don't draw but three dollars a week for all both jobs. Yes'm, that's all the work I can find anywhere to do. Cose it'd take me a longer time to clean up that big Methodist Church, but my oldest boy ain't got nothing to do and he helps me along on my job. That's Charlie - he come home sick the fifth of January and his doctor's bills have cost me two dollars a week ever since. The doctor said he had some kind of blood disease - had awful chills and fever to start with. He's up now, thank the good Lord, but he's still mighty poorly. Now, ain't I getting a heap out of my work? Ain't nobody knows my troubles but the Lord.

"The rent got so high where I was a-living over an Waverly Way Street and me not making nothing to speak of, I know'd I had to figure out another place to stay. Mr. Jacobs offered me these five rooms for five dollars a month and I thought that was putting it reasonable enough. Cose I furnishes my part and pays for my lights and water. Mr. Jacobs' wife died awhile back and him and his boy live in that other part of the house. They keeps to their side and I keeps to mine.

"If I had it all to do myself, I couldn't do it, but my baby boy helps me a little. If Jasper wasn't working, he couldn't go to school for he wouldn't have nothing to wear. That's how come Charlie and Louis had to quit going to school. I wasn't making it to send them and they couldn't get nothing to do. 'Twas all I could do to get something to eat and a place

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to stay, so my two oldest boys had to quit school in the sixth grade. Louis went to night school last year, but he's married now and that ends his learning, I reckon.

"Yes, my baby boy goes to school in the morning and works at Rogers' 9 grocery store in the evening. He comes home from school and swallows his dinner in a hurry so as to get to the store by three o'clock. Then he knocks off work at six o'clock and goes to Mrs. Green's every night to get his lessons. Mrs. Green, she sees to it that Jasper learns his lessons every night for the next day. He gets done studying 'bout eight-thirty o'clock and then he goes back to the store and helps them straighten up things for the next day. He don't never come home no sooner than eleven o'clock of a night. He's in the eighth grade now and I think he's done mighty well minding he had to take it rough and tumble.

"When Jasper settles up of a week to the store, he brings home two dollars and onced and again three dollars in a busy week. He uses it mostly to get his school supplies and school lunch, 'cause I ain't got it to give him to buy them with. Then if I runs short in a week, he takes it up. Yes'm, if I was to die tonight and they called for a penny to close my eyes, I wouldn't have it.

"I ain't moved my membership to Marion, but my three boys belong to that big Methodist Church up on Godbold Street. Still we go to the Church of God over yonder on Spring Street mostly. That's a Holiness Church and Sunday night's the big time over there, but they have prayer meeting every Wednesday evening. The preacher is one of these evangelist and he lives in a little trailer house right behind the church. Well, they do, they do have big crowds over there. Bet they entertains one hundred and fifty head of people of a Sunday night. Gracious Lord, the Church of God is as different from the Methodist Church as night is from day. You just ought to go and see for yourself - couldn't hardly explain the difference to save my life. Don't see no dancing and shouting at the Methodist Church like goes on at the Church of God. Don't allow no woman to bob her hair, wear no kind of jewelry, gold tooth, short sleeves, anklet 10 socks, nor dip snuff. And they's strictly against a man rolling his socks. Forbids a man to belong to a secret order, smoke, chew,

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nor drink liquor. Can't nobody go to no shows, dances nor play cards. Why they calls their dancing the holy dance. That's the rules of the Church of God and them what joins the church, they've got to abide by it's rules. No, sir, I'll tell anybody I ain't joined no Church of God, 'cause I've sho' got to have my short sleeves and low neck dresses a-working like I do. Just go there to look and listen like most of them other folks, I reckon.

"I could vote, but I don't. I just don't feel like it's right for lady folks to vote, 'cause I wasn't raised that way. Cose we's here and if we don't vote, other people will run it over us and get everything a-going their way. But I ain't never voted but twice in my life. I voted in Georgetown the first time and then I voted for Mr. Green when he was running for senator before he was judge. Mr. and Mrs. Green had been so sweet to me, I felt like I could do that little job for them. Cose Mrs. Green, she come and carried me up there and showed me how to do.

"Thank the good Lord, I've been blessed with good health all my days, else I never could've carried my burden. Weighed two hundred and fifty pounds the last time I stood on the scales. When I begin to fleshen up, I wanted to take something to reduce, but Mrs. Green wouldn't agree to it. She said I might injure my health and get so I couldn't work for my living. Mrs. Green used to tell me I was the funniest thing 'bout my eating, but I can't work on none of those queer diets of salads, ices, and a stingy sandwich. I've got to have my good old standby home cooking, sech as: rice, hominy, corn bread, some sort of greens, and boiled meat. You see, I works 'bout all the time and I've got to eat a heavy ration to keep a-going.

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"Days I'm at home, there's three meals a day to cook, and when I do that, the housework, and the washing, there's no time to recreate. Even sit up here at night and make quilt squares. I know I've got the will power 'bout me all right - know I've got a share to do long as I live. I believe, when a woman lives seventeen years and keeps enough to eat for

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herself and three growing children, does all the housework, keeps the beds repaired, and something for the youngsters to wear, she's just done well."